

Early and Cumulative Breakdown in Childhood and Adolescence, as Antecedents of Pervasive Guilt in the Self-Experience of Adults

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Abstract: Background: As part of the human experience, the phenomenon of guilt feelings is widely known and has over time been subjected to extensive research in the field of psychoanalysis. Objection: The present article examines the contribution of Kohut's self-psychology to the question of guilt and its impacts on the self. Method: A concept is proposed according to which early childhood experiences are recorded in the young mind as a form of guilt. Referred to as narcissistic guilt, it is an emotion that colors the individual's entire being. Two clinical case studies are presented, involving Holocaust survivors who experienced guilt for having remained alive without being able to save their family members. Result: The patients feeling of guilt is all-encompassing, leading them to regard themselves as rotten to the core. Many describe the tragedy as involving them in some way, with their being complicit, with guilt feelings haunting them unrelentingly, often in the form of nightmares. Conclusion: We propose to consider guilt as a narration to its observers of the tragic life circumstances of the patient, of the destruction that they encountered in their environments, long before they were able to process these tragic circumstances. These gave rise to pervasive guilt that colors and defines the totality of the person.

Keywords: Guilt, Narcissism, Holocaust, Survivors, Psychotherapy, Self-Psychology

1. Introduction

Guilt is a common phenomenon in the spectrum of human experience [1, 19]. Consequently "guilt" has acquired a central position in the writings and thought on psychotherapy and psychoanalysis [4, 6, 18]. In this article we will examine the contribution of Kohut's "self-psychology" to the subject of guilt [11, 12] and we will suggest a new conceptualization that describes a unique clinical and developmental constellation, in which the experiences of early breakdowns are inscribed in the mind as a form of guilt. This will be coined "Narcissistic Guilt". The use of the concept narcissistic is not intended here in the sense of egocentrism but rather as the guilt that pervades the experience of the self.

In our clinical work over the years in Israel, we frequently encountered and treated victims of the Holocaust. Memories emerging in treatment were frequently associated with various forms and qualities of guilt, though what characterized many of the narratives was the guilt at having survived and the inability of survivors, to save members of their families. The patients, were children and adolescents at the time their family members were murdered by the Nazis, and their ages ranged between ten and seventeen. Many of the survivors felt that they bore responsibility, either because of something they did or because of the something they omitted to do and that consequently, many of their family members were murdered. Many attributed the disasters and trauma that visited their families to themselves in some way and based and explained these feelings very rationally. Their

sense was that something said or not said, or done or not done, contributed to the disaster [2]. Both in their later lives and in old-age, the sense of guilt persecuted them incessantly, and manifested in nightmares.

On reflecting on the phenomenon of their guilt, we were impressed by the far-reaching impact of the genocide on the survivors, and their guilt. We sensed that this guilt is of a particular quality and we found it appropriate to coin it “narcissistic guilt”. Narcissistic guilt is a phenomenon that relates to a developmental and clinical constellation, founded on the concept of Kohutian self-psychology: If a person underwent or experienced overwhelming severe forces and felt that something terrible had occurred, they then attributed it to themselves and to their misdoing, and consequently experienced torturing guilt. It is then possible to assume that massive crisis situations leading to breakdowns, experienced during child and adolescent development may impact on and have deleterious influence on the primary “self” of those who experience them [2]. When something destructive or chaotic occurs in the developmental environment, it might color the ascending selfhood of the child in a way in which he is associated with and culpable of its occurrence and perhaps as even being the perpetrator [3].

This insight has notable implications for mental development and can contribute to the understanding of pathological states of the self and can contribute to clinical implications and therapeutic interventions [7].

To proceed further in the description of the essence of “Narcissistic Guilt” we will review what has been written in self psychology on the subject of guilt and then we will relate to it from the perspective of classical psychoanalysis.

It may be suggested that “shame”, for self-psychology, is what “guilt” is for classical psychoanalysis. Shame according to self-psychology derives from the centrality and vulnerability of the narcissistic axis that propels mental life, whereas feelings of guilt are the main product derived from the centrality of the instincts that propels the mind according to classical psychoanalysis. The central context around which Kohut discusses the issue of guilt, is the aggression and destructiveness of humanity. Kohut does not agree with theoreticians who view aggression, as an innate platform, and who assume that “guilt” is present and inescapable. Apropos the biological basis of the instinct of destructiveness, according to Kohut: “This perception arouses tremendous guilt in the patient, to consider himself as someone who has innate internal aggression, and that his responses are not connected to what he experiences from the outside, and in this way leaves the patient saturated with guilt.” Kohut suggests continued exploration of the sources of guilt and in his view, these are secondary products and are not the products of innate instincts. Kohut presents various clinical examples by means of which he illustrates how the demands and yearnings of the child for signs of love from his mother, are experienced as destructive and color his experience with an overall sense of his being injurious and consequently he remains guilt ridden. Guilt feelings in Kohut are close to the sense of shame. They belong to areas of adjacent breakdown,

primary in essence, and so are not easily discerned from each other. While shame arises when the exhibitionistic-self reveals itself and encounters an unconfirming response, “guilt” is associated with the experience of causing damage or injury or sorrow to the other. It is important to note that the world of psychological research has suffered from a lack of clarity in the distinction between shame and guilt, and they are sometimes used in similar ways.

Lewis [16] contends that the difference between the two phenomena lies in the aim or focus of the criticism and the negative evaluation. According to his understanding, in shame the focus is on the overall self, and so the experience of shame is one of being erased and unworthy. This while guilt, involves an injury that relates to specific aspects of behavior and so the overall personality remains uninjured.

“Narcissistic Guilt” because of its primary character, differs from Lewis’s claim, in that it colors the whole experience and leaves the person with an experience of being destructive and that his very being and actual existence, destroys and injures all those around him.

2. The Concept of Guilt

To clarify the central conceptualization of this paper with regard to “guilt” we emphasize that the intention is not grief or regret alone, but the feelings of guilt as described in psychoanalysis, which is a much more encompassing experience, that colors the whole existence of a person.

Feelings of regret or sorrow are part of normal development of the interpersonal and social intrapsychic structure. They are the normative and proper response to our sometimes hurting another. Distinct from this, feelings of overwhelming guilt, that color the overall experience of a person, are worthy of a more discerning examination.

3. Neurotic Guilt – Freud

Freud never wrote a book devoted to the subject of guilt, but nevertheless it is without doubt that his contributions were great, and he was the main founder of the research of guilt feelings as a psychoanalytic phenomenon [17]. Clearly distinct from the legal concept, guilt was presented as a phenomenon inherent to the existence of the deterministic instinct-ridden man. It may be said that by means of Freud’s oeuvre we distinguish between objective and subjective guilt or between legal and psychoanalytic guilt.

Later in Freud’s work, the concept of “guilt” became central to his work (“Civilization and its discontents”) [5]. In this book Freud described guilt as a most important issue in the progress of civilization and the loss of contentment and happiness arising from it, which comprises the price society must pay for its advance and for the existence of a normative society. In this essay, Freud concludes with the existence of unconscious guilt, since he identifies in his patients, the need for suffering, a deep wish to be punished and as if in that way, they will atone for the evil or wrongs for which they were capable.

According to Freud, initially, in early childhood, before the development of a super ego, which is evil is that, which threatens the danger of the loss of love. Later, when the super ego develops from the ego, it begins to function as an observer, a critic or judge. From this mental development feelings of guilt emerge, together with the wish to avoid bad deeds. Notwithstanding, because the super ego is an intrapsychic structure that is exposed not only to actions but also to fantasies and instincts that demand satisfaction, guilt may arise even without acts being actually committed.

4. Guilt According to Melanie Klein

Klein attributes much importance to the death and destructive instincts (together with the creation of integration with the life instinct) and views this as central to the problematics of child development. In Klein's view, infantile sadism is an expression of the death instinct [10]. Hence, guilt feelings are closely connected to this instinct, and play an important role in her theory. In 1935 Klein formulated her most important statement regarding guilt. She describes guilt as arising from the depressive position, and consequently coined it "depressive guilt" [9]. In contrast to the schizoparanoic position that is characterized by splitting of the object and part objects, the depressive position is characterized by a more whole perception of the object. From here, the understanding emerges that the disappointing and frustrating object is also the loving and gratifying object and consequently fear and anxiety arises of destroying the object. This is accompanied by a sense of mourning, guilt and reparation. In Kleinian theory, guilt feelings are the basis for love. As such, guilt in the oeuvre of Klein, is a developmental achievement that reflects maturation. In Klein and similarly in Freud, guilt is associated with and connected to the destructive instinctual baggage, inherent in humans, but different from Freud, its existence, when a product of the depressive position, indicates a mental achievement, that leads to and enables more developed emotional abilities.

5. Narcissistic Guilt

As previously stated, neurotic guilt describes an inherent state in a person, since they are always exposed to their instincts on the one hand and on the other, to the dictates of society that demands their restraint. So what it incurs, is intrapsychic and unconscious guilt. Depressive guilt on the other hand, is a desirable developmental phase that embodies a process of mental growth, that enables the subject to integrate between his destructive drives and his recognition of the whole existence of the object. Existential guilt is guilt, like neurotic guilt, as a basis in all humans but it not an instinctual product, but rather a product of the existential state of the person and as such is given to the demands of existence. Distinct from the feelings of guilt described up to this point, we will outline our conceptualization of a special quality of guilt. We mean the clinical developmental constellation in which the experience of early breakdowns,

that occur in a person's close human environment, are inscribed inside their minds as if they themselves generated them. This guilt we will coin "Narcissistic Guilt". The use of the term narcissistic is not intended here to convey egocentrism or preoccupation with the self, but rather guilt, because of its primary nature, and since it colors the whole experience of the self. It is not inherent in a person as described in the classical Kleinian or Existential psychoanalytic literature [8] but is the product of overwhelming emotional states in childhood, inscribed in the mind and determining their overall experience. It does not emanate from inborn destructiveness but reflects the dimensions of the breakdowns that occurred in the human environment of the infantile self. This assumption is in sync with the basic principles of self-psychology regarding the mind as a contextual product.

As was emphasized initially, we reached additional insights and understanding regarding the influence of breakdowns on the minds of our patients that we conceive of as extended overwhelming states in their childhood. If tens of people, after losing relatives in the holocaust, with varying degrees of proximity, sensed extreme guilt, then we can assume that developmental states of breakdown have tremendous power to color the experience of the individual (male or female) undergoing them, with a deep feeling of guilt apropos what had happened. The intent here, is a pervasive sense of guilt that colors the whole experience of the self. The guilt referred to is not one in which one feels one has done something bad, but something much more encompassing and fundamental – "I myself am bad! I am egoistic!"

One of the theses that we will propose, is that on certain occasions one can view the self-disgust expressed by the patients, not as a proof of their being defective, but rather, as evidence of and as a reflection and living proof of the extent and consequences of their earlier breakdown and the deficiencies that they experienced in their surroundings at the time. As when a person bears within themselves a sense of being worthy or unworthy, bad or evil, they reveal to us through themselves, that which was defective, deficient and impaired in their human environment, and the many ways in which others were unsuccessful in being with them adequately: Those around him deserted, leaving them to manage alone and they became full of the sense of themselves as being unentitled and unworthy. These are breakdowns that occur from the beginning of life, during years critical to the molding of character, and consequently these are powerful eventful forces in their capacity to determine the person's experience of himself. Many patients who experienced death in childhood, illness or depression in their parents, as well as chaotic situation in the family, present a similar mental and emotional constellation of the type that we suggest here. They come to the clinic when their overall experience of themselves is of being unworthy, bad, rotten and defective. It is a manifestation of a lack of self-love and sometimes of self-hate. Consequently, emanating from this, "Narcissistic guilt" will manifest frequently, not as

open guilt, but through a variety of symptoms, which reveal the manner in which the breakdowns were inscribed in the minds of the person. Sometimes this is through self-injury, sometimes through addiction to food, drugs, alcohol, sex etc.

It is possible that narcissistic guilt comprises an empathic act, from a simplistic point of view, to sense what is happening, but mainly as an attempt of the child to embody and carry the pain of the others, whose lives were destroyed or damaged, and for which they feel culpable.

6. Clinical Case Material

Rachel, an eighty-five year old woman, described her feelings of her life having no purpose or value. In her words: "I have brought too much pain to others around me". Rachel is a very intelligent and good-hearted woman, who suffers from an extreme lack of vitality, which may be viewed as "living alongside life". A devoted and good mother, she is persecuted by the constant sense that she damaged her daughter Roni, severely. These internal attacks on her emotional life, left her deprived of emotional nutrition, and empty and lacking happiness and vitality.

In one of our first sessions, Rachel shared her life narrative of the murder of her father in a ghetto, and how this marked the collapse of the whole family into a life of mourning, chaos and deprivation. Her mother was forced to cope, in addition to her mourning, with caring for the young Rachel in the context of the ghetto. The mother became apathetic and disassociated and the young Rachel tried for much time to draw closer to her, but did not succeed. All this occurred after the death of her father and in the cruel wartime situation.

Over the next months, Rachel began to tell of what she never shared with anyone – that since that time and until today, she lives with a real and deep sense that the terrible event that happened to her father is connected to her and happened because of her.

Once again, this illustrates the power of breakdowns in coloring the whole existence of a person, as if the events occurred because of them. These events concerned a young adolescent, who was surely not responsible for the death of her father nor for her own life, and fortunately she was miraculously saved. If anything, she was a victim of the situation. This illustrates how the mighty force of guilt raises its head and claims that the catastrophe was connected to something that the person did.

It cannot be known if the young Rachel had said or not said something at the time, or did or did not do something. And so she remained, cruelly tortured all her life at what had occurred, without anyone to reassure, to hug and to rationally explain and process her guilt away. In this way the terrible damage accumulated and escalated inside her and became inscribed inside her mind as if in her name. Eventually the damage became her self.

The premature death of her father was in itself definitively traumatic and together with the extended traumatic loss of her whole family, Rachel was left isolated and fearful that the disaster happened because of her. Rachel's internal

experience is not only of guilt but the experience of herself as defective or more precisely, damaged, as if she is both defective and damaged.

In one of the next sessions, Rachel expanded again on the "file of proof" of herself being blameworthy, guilty, culpable and invalid and I say to her: "Rachel, for my part what you say towards your self does not define who you are but it tells mainly of what happened to you. You remained with a sense of guilt because of the evil that occurred. Harsh events have much power and they inscribe themselves in whoever is nearby, experiencing them. What you feel is evidence of many things that were damaged and there was no one who survived who could explain, gather and hug you."

I added: "When something terrible occurs, it has tremendous power and inscribes itself on anyone nearby. Anyone connected to it or affected by it..." After a few minutes of silence, tears welled up in her eyes and Rachel added: "Damage became my second name".

"That is a powerful insight", I added tenderly.

In the next session, Rachel told me that she found herself singing Yiddish songs from her father's home, for the first time in a long time. She told me that after our last session, memories of her father's love for singing returned to her. After his death, the family broke apart and she was left without any joy. And then she narrated the story as it actually happened: When my father was murdered, they stopped talking about him. Actually, they stopped talking at all. Mother did not talk. I remember myself as a young adolescent trying desperately to reach her and to comfort her ... I suggested combing her hair, to try and make her happier.. but I didn't succeed with anything!

Therapist: "You sensitively and generously did all that you could, but the destruction all around was just too great!..."

Rachel: "Everything broke down and we remained a collection of lonely individuals. I lost my father, and to a great extent my mother, but I do not deserve to be disqualified from the world and surely not from my daughter ... We must live and I hope that my father will be able to accompany us... "To this I nodded in empathy and added: "And now he comes back to you through his songs.. and in this way you remember him and how he loved life".

Rachel: "You know, this is the first time that I am able to talk about Roni (her daughter). I saw that she was surprised to hear me singing, and she sat quietly listening and then asked me what I was singing and suddenly I found myself telling her about her grandfather and how he was humorous and good-hearted, and how he taught me songs and how we sang together. She then asked me to teach her the song that I was singing beforehand and we sang together. I was so moved! I thought of my father looking down on us from above and smiling..."

Therapist: "What a beautiful moment. One cannot ask for more ..."

This case illustrates the many complications of what occurred in Rachel's childhood and adolescence when her selfhood was starved and deprived of an affirming and admiring gaze, together with a guiding and comforting

hand... Within this absence, Rachel became guilt-ridden to her foundations and felt deeply worthless. While experiencing a continuous empathic holding situation in treatment, she succeeded in coming into emotional contact with the fact of her heaping on her own shoulders, all the destruction she experienced in the war. Realizing that, she was then enabled to return to the benevolent presence of her father, and to experience herself, as someone worthy of feeling alive and being alive. Also, once feeling worthy of existing, she was enabled to access her home from a soft and loving place, without the burden of pervasive guilt, and as someone judged for eternity for his iniquities. The therapeutic process that transformed her “excessive reparative and futile efforts” towards her mother to be recognized as vital forces of “sensitivity and generosity”, enabled Rachel to connect once again to her nuclear self by means of the flow of life and not through the destruction and breakdown.

We will point to two moments in the vignettes that reflect the moments of transformation. These moments embody creative playful occurrences, that enabled nourishment to spheres of her wounds and injury, and moments of fusion giving birth to a flow and movement towards compassion.

The first relates to Rachel's response to the interpretations apropos the origin of the sense of guilt from the crisis and breakdown that occurred in her youth, when she suddenly said “Ruin became my name”. In spite of the painful insight, it appears that this moment made place for a creative moment that led to the second moment, that occurred in the following session when Rachel returned to and become attached to the memory of her father from a position of “not being guilty”, when she was able to allow herself to feel the flow of life and said “I am no longer an adolescent without a name! My name is Rachel, and this is the name given to me by my father..”

Narcissistic guilt then, is the manner of inscription in the mind of what was ruined in the world. This guilt, generated in the person, becomes an insidious feeling of being bad, and that they are fundamentally evil. So the healing process entails restoring the nutrition of the needs of the self (mirroring and idealization) as well as much empathic and stable holding in the transference, as illustrated in the above case.

7. Clinical Case Material 2

Rosa, an eighty-eight year old woman, elegant and groomed, has a penetrating gaze and captivating smile. She suffers from insomnia for decades and at night has awful nightmares and has difficulty sleeping. Rosa is a good and devoted mother towards her children and husband but is tormented by nightmares and sleepless nights that leave her feeling empty and without energy.

In our sessions, silenced memories emerged and more recently an urgent urge arose to “tell what happened” together with futile, repeated attempts at writing her narrative in Polish and Hebrew. The memories emerged in associations and not always in the time sequence in which they occurred.

Rosa was fifteen years old when the bombing of Warsaw began. On the second night, a bomb fell on the family home and she described how she fled quickly to the home of her grandfather. She then discovered that her younger brother had disappeared during their flight. “All night we cried because we thought he had been killed”, but in the morning he arrived. He had confused the address of the buildings while frantically seeking safety from another bombing raid.

Rosa, the firstborn of three, with two younger brothers, used her amazing resources and initiatives in her survival during the war. A short time after her family was relocated to the ghetto, her father died. She, together with a friend, then discovered escape-routes from the ghetto that enabled her to bring food from a village across the river. During these ventures outside of the ghetto, she hid her Jewish descent and her Yellow Badge (Patch) but while on one of these missions, she discovered that she was unable to return and so she remained outside without her family. Because of her abilities to adapt and connect and establish relationships, she found a family willing to take care of her, and later they even took devoted care of her while she was ill with “typhus”. On returning to the ghetto, the Germans caught her together with other Jewish children and they forced them to work in bomb production, under shocking conditions. On return home from this work her hands were injured and bloody. She worked for the Germans in an airport, producing armaments, and in a coal mine for some periods as a Jewess and for some periods without revealing her Jewish origins. She proudly told me that she received a number, but that it was not inscribed on her arm. During the war she underwent three “Selections” and in the last of which she was saved at the last moment, when a family that knew her (She had cared for their son) declared her the sister of the father. Thereby she was saved and was sent to a labor assignment. On the way home from this “Selection” the roads were filled with corpses and she had difficulty in making her way... Earlier, in one of the previous sessions, Rosa told me the about the disappearance of her two younger brothers.

Rosa was transferred to work in agriculture, and there her condition improved. One day she heard calls to her, from a roof top nearby. She realized that they were calls from her younger brothers who had disappeared. Rosa had difficulty in recounting this and burst into tears in this session and also in the following sessions, when each time that she tried to continue her account of what happened. With great difficulty she told me that she signaled them to go away for fear both for her identity being revealed and also out of concern that they will be discovered, caught and murdered ...with them being so young. Rosa returned to these moments in her narrative many times over many of the sessions that followed, and each time, she stopped speaking and she cried effusively, saying that she could not continue. This event marked the moment of breakdown in Rosa's life, and it propelled her into a lifetime of guilt and unbearable mourning. Over the following sessions, Rosa recounted that since then and until today, she lives with a true and harsh sense that the terrible fate that visited her younger brothers,

happened because of what she did and her culpability.

It can be seen from Rosa's narrative that states of breakdown can color the whole existence of a person, as if the events unfolded because of their guilt. After all, Rosa's life was saved miraculously and she herself was a victim of terrible circumstances.

Rosa suffered from chronic insomnia, and since the war she was not able to sleep at night. She described that she was unable to fall asleep at night as guilt feelings and thoughts arose that perhaps she could have saved her brothers and mother.

"During the day I was always diligent, worked and cooked and took care of everything" whereas nights were always so difficult!. I didn't have one quiet night. I cannot describe the terrible feeling and thoughts that occupied me that perhaps I could have or should have ... or that I didn't do enough

Rosa repeatedly told me that she is guilty and unworthy, because of her brothers' deaths.

The feelings that surfaced in me was that what Rosa feels towards herself does not tell me who she is, but mainly tells me of the terrible experiences she underwent.

I said: You know Rosa, when such difficult, traumatic events happen to young people, they have tremendous powers to blame themselves because of being associated or nearby. The inscription in the mind is unerasable, perhaps even more so that the physical inscription on the arms. Rosa: "You know that in times of crisis, people become smarter and so in the camps during the Holocaust there were children who were more street-smart than older people"

8. Conclusion

This article offers an invitation to reflect on one of the most common emotions in our culture: Guilt In spite of its centrality, the subject of guilt is insufficiently developed in Kohutian thought [13]. In this article a development in the conception of the phenomenon of guilt is proposed, from a self-psychological perspective.

We propose to consider guilt as a narration to its observers of the tragic life circumstances of the patient, of the destruction that they encountered in their environments, long before they were able to process these tragic circumstances. These gave rise to pervasive guilt that colors and defines the totality of the person. We coined this guilt "narcissistic guilt". Our intention is to consider the narrative of what was damaged in the human environment of the person who remains feeling "unworthy" and "guilty". There are multiple manifestations of breakdown, but there is nothing like an outstretched hand that enables the birth of a new experience, when the patient is held and is enabled to experience themselves as someone worthy of reestablishing their existence. The needs of the self that were so severely damaged in childhood, require a massive consistent nutritious infusion together with empathic holding [15, 14], to bring

about relief and a cure of the experiences of inner death suffered from such breakdowns.

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